Abstract. Following the Treaty of Trianon, in Transylvania, which had been detached from historical Hungary and attached to Romania, besides the Romanian majority, there lived a considerable Hungarian- and German-speaking minority. Although in the last two decades of the communist dictatorship – in the 70s and 80s – as a consequence of emigration to Germany, the number of ethnic Germans decreased substantially, the number of Hungarian speakers is over one million even today. Regarding the characteristics of the post-World War II literary discourse and cultural policy, in the second half of the forties, the communist power gained control over all manifestations of community life in Romania. It regulated culture and the arts, banned, abolished, or restructured all forums that had enjoyed some kind of independence, and completely revised the literary and artistic canon. In this era, the discourse emphasizing the aspects of revolutionary transformation and radical policy change decisively builds on the enemy image; the fault-line between past and present and the necessity of continuous political struggle prevail in both poetry and prose. In order to achieve the intended social goals, this kind of communist sacrifice ethics regards the annihilation of resisters, protesters, and even of the internal opposition not only as a possibility but as an assumed necessity. This paper aims to present the ideological/political and aesthetic/poetic tendencies that determined Transylvanian Hungarian literature and cultural policy from the mid-40s until the end of 20th century.

Keywords: Transylvanian Hungarian literature, communist power control, literary discourse, cultural policy
1. Introduction

After World War I, the advocates of Transylvanianism, one of the Transylvanian Hungarian community’s leading ideology, declared that Transylvania was a specific entity and home to the three Transylvanian ethnic communities, Hungarians, Romanians, and Saxons, who had been living together for centuries. The start of this political/cultural movement is frequently related to the publication of the pamphlet Kiáltó Szó (Calling Voice), whose authors and supporters were prominent Transylvanian Hungarian writers and intellectuals, among them – to name but a few – Károly Kós, Árpád Paál, István Zágoni, Endre Dózsa, and Sándor Reményik. The Transylvanianists set themselves the goal of realizing cultural autonomy (See: Balogh 1999). As Géza Szávai, a contemporary Hungarian writer from Transylvania discusses: Transylvanianism mainly consisted of three different ideological orientations: emphasizing the rights of Hungarian speakers to surviving on the native land as a moral imperative, highlighting the specificity of “Transylvanian Spirit”, and creating the historical background of national consciousness (Szávai 2004: 166–179). However, these issues suffered significant changes from the late 40s when the requirement to survive on the native land was redefined in different strategies of adaptation to the social/political goals of (the communist) power or protest against assimilative aspirations, censorship, and abolition of minority institutions. The idea of common values and interests of nationalities living together and the historical extension of interdependence of cultures were increasingly replaced by (emotional) attachment to the mother tongue and Hungary, as well as by emphasizing the need for Hungarian national identity. All the more so since official forums barely made it possible for Transylvanian Hungarian intellectuals to do so. In 1940, as a result of the second Vienna Treaty, Northern Transylvania was reunified with Hungary, but this partial reunification only lasted until the end of World War II, when the allies granted Romania the whole territory again. At the beginning of the 40s, during a period of less than five years, approximately 160 000 Northern Transylvanian Jews (most of them ethnic Hungarians) were deported and killed by Nazi Germany. Between 1941 and 1948, the Hungarian Transylvanian community decreased from 1 706 000 to 1 481 000 persons (Varga 1988: 39–41).¹

¹ All scholarly literature not originally written in English is referred to by the author in his own translation.
2. Literature and cultural policy from the mid-40s to the end of the 50s

After the instauration of the communist regime in Romania, the “revolutionary” process of consolidating the Soviet-style new power, in Transylvania the idea of opposition between the Romanian majority and the Hungarian minority was increasingly replaced by propagating the necessity of “class struggle” and radical social change. At the same time, almost nobody noticed that the gradually developing machinery of the totalitarian state almost completely destroyed all individual and collective forms of organizations created through no small effort between the two world wars to promote Hungarian culture and identity, and, eventually, the historic churches. “Following World War II”, observes Stefano Bottoni, “the Transylvanian Hungarian world integrated into the Romanian state structure—and after 1948 into the Romanian communist state without being forced to abandon cultural identity. That is why the permission to use the mother tongue and national symbols, and actually the utopia of building socialism in Hungarian obscured the fact that many Hungarians unconsciously assisted in developing an extremely harsh dictatorship” (Bottoni 2008: 14–15).

The 1946 note entitled “Itt élned, halnod kell” [Here You Must Live and Die] by Edgár Balogh, a prominent representative of the Transylvanian Hungarian left-wing intelligentsia between the two world wars, can be considered an instructive ideological precedent. In this note, he mentions that at the people’s meeting held on the occasion of the anniversary of world peace in Kolozsvár (Cluj), a Transylvanian city, which at the time was still inhabited by a Hungarian majority, Hungarian speakers were booed by the Romanian-speaking audience. Apart from blaming the Hungarian proletariat for being passive, in his writing, Balogh regards this extreme nationalist gesture as an open demonstration of power on the part of Romanian bourgeois “reaction”, and gives voice to the hope that in the spirit of the new internationalism represented by the working class, manifestations of this kind will disappear from Transylvanian public life once and for all:

On 10 May, in front of the Romanian Cathedral in Kolozsvár, I wasn’t surprised by the whistle storm that broke out when Hungarian speakers rose to speak but by the relatively small number of workers present. [...] I shouted words into the microphone, and I couldn’t even hear my own voice. I was speaking on behalf of all of us who want a better world, and my words elicited a negative response. [...] Those who had instigated Romanian students and advised Hungarian workers to stay away knew very well what they were doing. Their double game stabbed democracy in the back. (Balogh 1957: 286–287)
Nevertheless, Edgár Balogh’s words seem interesting not only from the perspective of that truth-seeking intellectual attitude which states firmly that “people’s democracy”, that is to say, the new socialist politics will no longer tolerate nationalist rhetoric, but also because they appeared, along with the unintentional references to the Hungarian revolution of 1956, in the collected edition of his works in 1957.

In the period immediately following World War II, texts of literary history and cultural policy analysing the relation between literature and the new state power system apparently do not emphasize party loyalty and militant revolutionary attitude but the superiority of socialist ideas and service for “the people”, “freedom”, and “humanity” by means of a certain kind of “representation of reality”. In one of his books published in 1946, Lajos Jordáky, a Hungarian sociologist, critic, and essayist in Kolozsvár talks about the mutual relationship between literature and socialist state, as well as about their common goals, highlighting that the writer’s duty is to reshape society, to strengthen socialist ideals, class consciousness, and to represent reality:

The writer now wants the new form of literary expression to be the manifestation of the social class to which they belong. [...] Socialism creates the precondition for the birth of great literary works: freedom; and it allows the masses access to these literary works: through people’s well-being. Literature, on the other hand, serves and facilitates the implementation of socialism through the assessment and artistic representation of reality. For this very reason, socialists and writers must find each other, recognizing that they actually want the same thing and must work closely together. (Jordáky 1946: 8)

In Jordáky’s view, it is not yet party or ideological loyalty that primarily determines literary activity but rather the idea of serving the truth, the people, and freedom. Knowing the Soviet model, the following sentences probably seemed ironic even at that time: “Socialism, unlike any other ideology, doesn’t want the writer to be a party writer; it doesn’t even expect them to be a party member. [...] The writer serves humanity, the good, the truth, and freedom just as much as socialism does.” Yet, Jordáky contradicts himself when in a later chapter of the book redefines the concept of “party poet”: “In a socialist sense, the party poet is the poet of the class and progressive mankind, just as the self-conscious and militant party of the working class is the party of the class and progressive mankind. [...] At the same time, they who, by their art, promote socialism are party poets, even if organizationally they are not members of the Labour Party” (Jordáky 1946: 76–77). The same idea can be found in Gábor Gaál’s writings on topics concerning aesthetics and history of poetry (Gaál 1950: 286–291, 301–310), and
also in the unambiguous gesture that as chief editor of the literary journal *Utunk*, he provides an opportunity for right-wing authors debuted between the two world wars (Gáll 199:15) to publish their works. Even István Nagy, probably the fiercest defendant of Soviet communist patterns of propaganda literature, appreciates Sándor Kacsó’s, Emil Grandpierre’s, László Szabédi’s, or Sándor Fodor’s works and rejects the most extreme clichés of communist consciousness and class struggle. In a 1948 article, he says: “Our writers very often err in describing the party and the class enemy. They give the impression that party members are ideally good people while endow the class enemy with the evilst monstrosities. So, they distinguish the most conscious characters of the two classes by extremely striking colours. That’s a mistake because it has no educational value, nor is it true that only white and black colours oppose each other” (Nagy 1957: 106). Of course, this dictatorial and radically change-demanding period in Transylvanian Hungarian literature was far from being without any – ideological – conflicts. For example, let us just mention the controversy erupted over János Arany’s, one of the greatest 19th-century Hungarian poets’, best-known epic poem, *Toldi*: in the spirit of socialist realism, Gábor Gaál severely condemns his fellow writer, Marcell Benedek, accusing him of anachronistic aestheticism and disregard for class categories (Gaál 1950: 334–339). His opinion about Transylvanian Hungarian literature between the two world wars is very ambivalent. While he speaks highly of István Petelei’s short stories, he attacks with the same fervour Sándor Reményik’s “bourgeois”, “nationalist” poetry (Nagy 1957: 221–233, 112–124). As a general characteristic of internal showdowns in Central and Eastern Europe, a few years later the accuser himself becomes the accused one, in consequence of which Gábor Gaál is forced several times to “practice self-criticism” due to “ideological unpreparedness”.

Probably the greatest difference between Stalinist literature in Romania and Hungary can actually be attributed to their different positions reflected in the relation between the author and state power. While Transylvanian Hungarian literature – due to its minority status – was always treated by the Romanian communist regime as an extraneous phenomenon, the mother country writers were able to participate more directly in the definition of the aesthetic/ideological orientation of cultural and art policy and in the exercise of power. It follows from the necessity of this kind of subordination that in the literary works of the late 40s and early 50s the contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian literature emphasized a new, reinterpreted version of Transylvanianism: fraternity between nations and joining forces in the ideological/political struggles (Balogh 1957: 301–305, 314–319; Gaál 1950: 280–285; Nagy 1955: 268–272). Nonetheless,
this proved to be a rather futile attempt since Romanian writers did not really reciprocate these gestures. Of course, contemporary literary criticism and history writing in Hungary also sought to consolidate the same ideological/political position inasmuch as they were extremely careful to avoid even the appearance of somehow offending the sensibilities of the “friendly” socialist countries while making efforts to strengthen the identity of transborder Hungarian communities.

Nevertheless, while within Hungarian literature and cultural politics in Romania in the late 40s and early 50s prevailed – maybe precisely because minority discourse was left out of mainstream ideology – a more or less permissive attitude which under the circumstances allowed various voices of leftism to assert themselves, in Rákosi’s Hungary the Stalinist internal showdowns were much more radical.

After all, the intensification of class struggle, the enhancement of political and ideological vigilance, the pressing demand for theoretical firmness, the search for the hiding places of the enemy even in the cultural frontline – these sparked the controversy over comrade Lukács’s certain opinions, which, in fact, did not help us, the working class, the Party but the wavering, the opponents of the Party’s policy, in a word: the enemy. [...] Comrade Lukács’s [...] literary slogans did not comply with the Party’s increasingly harsh political and economic slogans. [...] When the Party intensified its struggle against capitalists, when revolution was far behind us, then, in the spring of 1949, comrade Lukács turns to the right and begins to fight – not for socialist realism but basically against it, against those literary currents and their representatives who – in one way or another – stood for progress towards socialist realism.

– concludes József Révai, the omnipotent leader of cultural and literary life in Hungary, briefly summarizing the era’s arts policy “objectives” in a damning article written against György Lukács (Révai 1950: 284, 287).

The somewhat more open nature of Transylvanian Hungarian literary and cultural discourse of the time may also be put down to the fact that, unlike in Hungary, the worldview of left-wing writers and intellectuals in Transylvania received impulses from very different sources, largely influencing the development of left-wing ideology after World War II (Bottoni 2008: 170–171). Nándor Bárdí speaks of four left-wing generations who played a more or less significant role in shaping the political orientation of Transylvanian Hungarians after the communist takeover (Bárdí 2004: 71–85). According to Bárdí’s classification, the third and especially the fourth generation assumed a leading role in organizing literary and cultural life after the consolidation of communist power mainly in the 50s and 60s, namely: Ferenc Szemlér, Edgár Balogh, István
In the early 50s, when – in concordance with Stalinist Soviet nationalities policy – the Hungarian Autonomous Region was established, Transylvanian Hungarian left-wing intellectuals undoubtedly experienced it as a triumph of freedom and sincere gesture of socialist ideology. They believed that ethnic conflicts would definitively end, or at least dissolve in an idealistic post-nationalist/internationalist view particularly emphasized by the communist propaganda, despite the fact that the political decision also created an opposition between the Hungarian intelligentsia (writers, journalists) of Cluj/Kolozsvár – the most important Hungarian cultural centre in Transylvania – and the same of Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureş, the new centre of the Autonomous Region. “There is no doubt that in the old Romania the communists proved to be consistent defenders of minorities, and they were also the allies whom one could rely on against the anti-minority right-wing, against fascism [...] It is also a fact that in 1946 Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej stated: the ethnic Hungarian community is considered an ally of Romanian democracy, and at that time this statement did not remain mere rhetoric”, says Ernő Gáll (one of the prominent literary, journalistic, and cultural political personalities after World War II) in his memoirs written in the 90s (Gáll 1995: 9).

However, the fact that in Transylvanian Hungarian culture – which, in some respects, may be considered an ethnic subculture – conflicts between different political/ideological tendencies within the party did not arise as acutely as in Hungary does not even remotely imply that free speech or at least a certain “polyphony” was allowed to be part of the literary life of the era; authors referred to as “rightists” or “bourgeois” were completely silenced after the communist takeover in Romania, as well. Let us only mention here the tone of the debate erupted in the mid-50s in the literary journal Utunk on the occasion of republishing the works of Jenő Dsida, a Transylvanian Hungarian poet who lived between the two world wars and died young, as well as the attitude of those in power and the subsequent harsh political attacks (Panek 1998: 208–257). The old bourgeois writer, the “parasitic” intellectual – as Gábor Gaál puts it in several of his studies published in the second half of the 40s – must go into the dustbin of history (Gaál 1950: 269–274, 275–279). In consequence of such cultural struggles, a growing number of writers are forced to choose to temporarily remain silent, while others drop out of literary and public discourse because they are sentenced to several years in prison on fabricated charges (e.g. Lajos Jordáky).

In a social context where all manifestations of minority existence and search for identity were subject to strict limitations, literature was the only medium that gave the possibility of taking a stand on various issues. The suppression of the Hungarian uprising of 1956 was followed by reprisals in Romania, as well; communist
authorities tried to intimidate young Hungarian intellectuals. Many writers and poets, such as Géza Páskándi, Ferenc Bartis, Lajos Páll, and Gyula Dávid, were sentenced to serious jail time on fabricated charges, while others – for instance, Domokos Szilágyi – “escaped” retaliation probably only through collaboration with the secret service (cf. Selyem 2007: 5–38). Another impact of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution was the abolition of the Hungarian Autonomous Region and the Bolyai University, steps toward the „nationalizing” communism in Romania.


From the mid-60s until about the first half of the 70s, Hungarian culture and literature in Romania gained some freedom for a relatively short time. This meant that as a result of “socialism with a human face,” it was no longer absolutely necessary to follow the patterns of socialist realism, glorification of the Party, and building communist society. The new leader of Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu, in his needing to make a compromise with Hungarian intelligentsia, accepted to establish some new Hungarian institutions – for example, the Kriterion Publishing House and the weekly journal A Hét. At the same time, the previously rejected “individualism”, the private sphere, the representation of subjective and existential issues, and the topics pertaining to historical tradition or Hungarian national identity (in fact, rather the identification with the Transylvanian, Székely community) also came to the fore in the literary works of the period. For half a decade, Transylvanian artists enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than those living in Hungary. However, the limits of this relative freedom are well illustrated by the controversy erupted in connection with the “double bond” of Transylvanian Hungarian literature (which meant that it belonged both to Hungarian and Romanian literature), in consequence of which the Romanian party leadership ordered the writers and editors of literary journals to publicly distance themselves from the idea raised by the Hungarian Writers’ Association as a “nationalist deviation” (Kántor 2005). It is obvious that until the regime change in 1989 in such a context intellectuals were forbidden from using the expression “Transylvanian Hungarian literature” instead of “Hungarian literature in Romania”. Lajos Kántor and co-author Gusztáv Láng were accused of revisionism because in the title of their literary history summary they indicated the year 1945 although in Romania “liberation” began on 23 August 1944. The story told by Aladár Lászlóffy is also worth mentioning as one of the first young Transylvanian Hungarian poets whose poems were published in the Forrás book.

3 The Székelys (Hungarian pronunciation: [ˈseːkrj]) are a subgroup of the Hungarian people living mostly in the Székely Land in Romania; they played a key role in the defence of the Kingdom of Hungary.
series, reserved for first-book authors, which functioned from the 60s until the end of the 80s. The story is about to what extent the relationship with those in power was relaxed and about why, despite all caution, an unforeseeable coincidence or unexpected political event posed enormous risks to the writers and editors of the period:

The Forrás series is filled with Mihály Babits, Gyula Illyés, and Dezső Kosztolányi, not to mention Attila József. The whole past, along with the Battle of Mohács, has appeared in these texts. Censors were often quite sensitive to certain verses, “Well, that’s no good!”, and then you had to come to an agreement with them. Yet, at other times, if something fitted in with their ideas as progressive tradition – and everybody fitted in as progressive tradition –, they didn’t protest. In this regard, embracing progressive tradition was not only allowed but also desirable. What irritated censorship was often of an entirely personal nature or was in the air. For instance, for a while, I edited the Sunday supplement of Előre. One day, a young man named Péter Cseke comes to me and says: “I have written a report about the village of Recsenyéd, about the things they did at the turn of the century; terrible, but these people emigrated to America. That is not correct ideologically, but I also criticize them.” Its title was: We Skated over to America. I enthusiastically approved the report. How could I have known that the following week Ceauşescu would go to America? That could have caused a lot of trouble if we hadn’t noticed it in time. (Hevesi et al. 2001: 45)

4. Ideological and political terror from the mid-70s until the end of the 80s

From the second half of the 70s, however, after Nicolae Ceauşescu’s visit to China and North Korea in 1971, this relative freedom would gradually disappear within a few years’ time. In Romanian politics, nationalism comes to the fore; the Securitate, the Romanian secret service resorts to increasingly drastic methods to intimidate society. In the 80s already, the purpose of the regime is to assimilate,

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4 “Forrás Generation” is a term for writers whose works were published in the series called Forrás, reserved for first-book authors, from 1961 onwards. The first of the Forrás authors was Zoltán Veress, followed by Gyula Szabó, Sándor Kányádi, András Sütő, Andor Bajor, János Székely, and Géza Páskándi; the second “generation” was represented by Aladár Lászlóffy, László Király, Árpád Farkas, Ferenc Kenéz, Zsigmond Palocsay, Ádám Bodor, etc.; the third generation consisted of those writers, essayists, and philosophers that assumed a leading role in organizing literary and cultural life in the 70s and 80s, namely Gusztáv Molnár, Sándor Szilágyi N., Vilmos Ágoston, Gáspár Miklós Tamás, Géza Szőcs, Péter Egyed, Mária Adonyi Nagy, etc.
annihilate ethnic minorities, and as a result of forced resettlement policies coordinated by state authorities, Hungarians become an insignificant minority in many Transylvanian cities (See: Varga 1988). The government seeks to abolish or merge cultural and educational institutions that have earlier possessed some degree of autonomy; at the same time, it subjects all literary forums to strict, centralized political control. Vilmos Ágoston, a Transylvanian Hungarian writer and critic who emigrated to Hungary in the 80s, remembers the forced engagement between public life, art, and literature as follows: “Magyar Műhely [Hungarian Workshop in Paris] was not banned for being avant-garde but for being Hungarian. […] We had to avoid the possibility of direct confrontation to express our opinion on that particular situation in which we were living because if I had written that here Hungarians are oppressed, that’s a sentence, a general statement, but it surely would not have been published” (Ágoston 1994: 12, 16).

Although, from a certain point of view, the recollections of Aladár Lászlóffy, Lajos Kántor, or Vilmos Ágoston can only be regarded as fiction, part of the communist “grand narrative”, it is unquestionably a matter of fact – despite that it does not strictly fall within the scope of literary studies – that in the 80s Romania faced the most horrible totalitarian dictatorship in Central and Eastern Europe. In these years, the excessively pervasive personality cult, the ideological terror, and the – disguised or undisguised – assimilative aspirations made the life of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania extremely difficult. Zsófia Balla, a Transylvanian Hungarian poet who debuted at the end of the 60s, aptly points out one of the distinctive aspects of the 80s in the Ceauşescu era: “This society has already got used to the Party always telling them how to be moral and how to write” (Balla 1994: 22). This historical and social/political context most obviously influenced the Transylvanian Hungarian literary canon and the orientation of the critical reception of literary works, since all public figures were fully aware that resistance to power would easily lead to expulsion, silencing, or even physical destruction.

Consequently, knowing the situation in Romania in the 80s, any approach according to which literature functioned as unconditional political engagement or as the only possible (counter-)discourse can be re-evaluated; not to mention that on such a predetermined path the aesthetic/poetic function of literary works, creative freedom, and inventiveness were inevitably pushed into the background. Literary works created before the 1989 regime change usually “suggest a moral system which displays the ideal of dutiful steadfastness rather than that of fruitful initiative”, states Éva Cs. Gyimesi, one of the best-known Transylvanian Hungarian critics of the 20th century (Cs. Gyímesi 1999: 10). In Transylvanian Hungarian literature, we might add, this ambition was especially abandoned by those “artistic” endeavours which strove to serve the goals of the existing power (in some cases, the same authors also represented the former
tendency, the tradition of dutiful steadfastness). However, defying power through literature became not only an artistic imperative in the 70s and 80s but also an expectation on the part of the readers. The social role of the writer, the noble fight for the “right cause” was of vital importance to the reading public, which highly contributed to the appreciation and revaluation of literature and all creative work in general. In this way, the social prestige of a particular literary text was often more important than its aesthetic quality. On the other hand, literary criticism in Hungary – if it wished to deal with the issue of “transborder” Hungarian literature at all – could only confirm this necessity, which had become a tradition, and, regarding the cult and canon formation mechanisms of the 70s and 80s, significantly contributed to the strengthening of the value system that legitimized the fetishizing of the creative role and the revelation-like, exalted discourse as an aesthetic/poetic expectation. The aspirations most often represented exactly by the institutionalized reception itself in judging literary works are dictated not only by aesthetic but also ideological considerations, which can certainly affect the acceptance or rejection of a particular author, text, or literary tendency (see: Szilveszter 2020).

Thus, while in the context of the 60s and 70s, the artistic representation of the (existential) problems of the Transylvanian Hungarian community was still possible through a heroizing/mythical or tragic/ironic discourse, later, in the 80s, references to community identity and traditions, or any form of religious expression, immediately put both author and text on a blacklist. “At first”, recalls Vilmos Ágoston, a Transylvanian Hungarian writer and critic who emigrated to Hungary in the 80s, “they watched very carefully so the word ‘Hungarian’ would not occur twice on a page, and then they watched very carefully so it would not occur at all” (Ágoston 1994: 17). Nevertheless, the authors referred to by the critical reception as the Third “Forrás” Generation wished to create their own value system within a stylistic/poetic orientation that in some respects got much closer to trends in European literature than to traditional Transylvanian discourse. The most characteristic feature of this mode of speech is probably language game and ironic self-reflection: “Much could be said about this different kind of intellectual orientation. On the one hand, it’s more disillusioned, and, on the other, it’s more playful and lighter”, says Zsófia Balla, talking about her contemporaries (Balla 1994: 8–21). This literary attitude, instead of presenting the exposure of the individual to power as a universal human problem, focuses increasingly on allusions to real events and persons or on the ironic/allegoric mode of representation as a means of protest. Consequently, the artistic representation of various repressive mechanisms, abuses of power, as well as the more and more concrete references may limit the contextual background determining the act of reception in such a way that within a broader interpretative horizon, it evidently deprives its censor of the meaning of the text. “Only fairies know the boundaries
of Fairyland”, says, with no small amount of irony, Ferenc Bréda, a well-known representative of young intellectuals in Kolozsvár, who debuted in the second half of the 70s and was editor of the Hungarian pages of the Echinox periodical (of Babeş–Bolyai University) between 1977 and 1979 (Bréda 1994: 44).

5. Culture, community, and literature after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989

For the Transylvanian Hungarian community, the 1989 regime change was supposed to mean the end of nationalist dictatorship, of the infinitely intensified ideological/political terror, of the deliberate policy of ethnic homogenization, and the solution of minority issues as well as of internal and external conflicts. But, after a few months of cloudless enthusiasm, in 1990, Transylvanian Hungarians had to face the rearrangement of previous power structures. They confronted national and ethnic conflicts, disguised assimilation, and economic vulnerability. The National Salvation Front led by Ion Iliescu, which as a party easily won the first elections due to its dominant position, adopted an anti-intellectual and anti-minority policy from the very beginning. After a very short pause, Romanian secret services resumed their activities, largely based on the repressive machinery of dictatorship, the former Securitate staff, supporting political organizations formed from second-line members of the communist nomenclature. Thus, until the mid-90s, Romania functioned as a semi-authoritarian state, where former beneficiaries of the communist regime consolidated their political and economic positions. “December 1989”, points out Stefano Bottoni, “successfully ousted the old regime and its elite: Ceauşescu’s direct subordinates. The new power elite stepped out from the second line of the old ruling class. If the Romanian Communist Party had not been dissolved, we could only have talked about a radical elite change within the party” (Bottoni 2014: 265–266).

The continuous denial of the historical presence of Hungarians in Transylvania, the expropriation of cultural and community spaces, the tendentious reinterpretation of recent events defined the electoral messages of both left- and right-wing political parties for a quarter of a century after the 1989 regime change. Right from the first months after the regime change, radical nationalists gained ground, who saw the presence of ethnic minorities, especially the self-organizing efforts of the Transylvanian Hungarian community, as a major threat and sought to undermine them by all means possible (cf. Illyés & Kántor 2012: 79–98). At the same time, as part of subtle political manipulations, there developed an old/new national ideal and “hero-worship” that tried to enhance the prestige of the military, state security organs, and law enforcement authorities, particularly by alluding to external and internal “threats” and by maintaining “historical” enemy
images. In fact, this ideology relied on militaristic rhetoric just as that of the Ceauşescu era, more or less openly establishing the continuity with the minority policy and repressive strategies of the past forty years. So, deliberate intimidation and discrimination were present to a greater or lesser degree in Romanian political and cultural forums, print and electronic media in the same way as in some court decisions or during various official inspections. Double-talk played an active role in this kind of policy, which promised the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance “exemplary” solutions to minority issues, while the selective – or tendentiously biased – application of laws and incitement against minorities for the sake of electoral success was part of the daily practice (Szilveszter 2020).

However, compared to previous years, after 1989, a radical change of direction occurred in the political and cultural life of the Transylvanian Hungarian community, especially with regard to the openness of the newly created community spaces, the opportunities provided by literary journals and newspapers, and the various forms of self-organization. Following the abolition of censorship, free speech and freedom of expression, under the circumstances, was ensured, just as there also existed a relative freedom of movement, at least to Hungary and the former communist countries (smooth travel to the European Union became possible only after Romania’s accession in 2007). Amid new opportunities, almost at all levels of society, the question emerged as to whether to remain on the native land or emigrate. All the more so since a new kind of dialogue began to develop between Hungary and the Transylvanian Hungarian community in the first half of the 90s – this was a slightly cautious but productive and equal partnership until the early 2000s.

There is no doubt that intellectuals were able to integrate into Hungarian society more easily and were much less exposed to different experiences of discrimination. “Graduates who immigrated to Hungary”, states Ildikó Zakariás:

> are different from temporary migrant workers with respect to their social status, labour market situation, and network of contacts: they leave one kind of environment and arrive in a different one. If they managed to find a job according to their qualification – and that is more probable among graduates than among other groups –, they did not have to deal with the difficulties of low-prestige work or labour market and residential isolation. Due to less stringent immigration regulations in the early 90s, obtaining Hungarian citizenship encountered fewer obstacles in the labour market. (Zakariás 2008: 37)

Even so, the attitude of Hungary towards “Transylvanians” wishing to move to Hungary was by no means always so unambiguous. The “guest worker”, who in the maze of bureaucracy was treated in the same way as immigrants coming
from other continents, the “foreigner”, who had to wait for (permanent) residence permit or was forced to cross the border from month to month because of their illegal status, rightly felt that in the eyes of the mother country they are the second-rate, unwelcome, and unpleasant “relative”. They, if possible, should hide their identity in order to avoid the tactless questions, the ignorant wonderment about their language skills. It took almost twenty years to overcome fears fuelled politically as well and to solve this unfair situation. In this context, of course, it is also obvious that the Transylvanian Hungarian community often assessed the gravity of the motherland promises, as well as the various intentions and opportunities available in the given economic/political environment, incorrectly. Especially in the first decade of the 2000s, Transylvanian Hungarian national identity and consciousness were characterized by a duality that, on the one hand, expected stimulus and support for their cultural, political, and economic struggles, for the realization of their individual and collective goals almost exclusively from Hungary. On the other hand, because of the non-fulfilment of their – sometimes perhaps excessive – hopes, they defiantly turned against the theatrical gestures, overly cautious attitude of Budapest public life and state leadership, as well as against all manifestations that took the issue of transborder Hungarians to the arena of daily political skirmishes.

Transylvanian Hungarians, particularly intellectuals, always laid claim to some kind of independence, especially regarding the manipulative intents of Hungarian party politics. In the spirit of equal partnership, they mostly rejected all efforts aimed at controlling public discourse, at monopolizing the shared values of the past and present, the historical tradition or the feeling of national unity. From such a perspective, the dreamy nationalist rhetoric or the colonialist attitude caused the same dissatisfaction as the political/ideological orientation that treated transborder Hungarians as Hungarian-speaking “Romanian” guest workers, or immigrants. This attitude was certainly changed after the year 2010.

As for the cultural and literary life, with the disappearance of external and internal boundaries, the 1989 regime change offered many new possibilities for intellectuals. Transylvanian Hungarian authors can freely publish their works in Hungary, as it is quite natural for authors living in Hungary to publish their works in Transylvania: “[…] authors who have remained in Transylvania also get the attentive reader to browse the Budapest book catalogues if one is curious about their writings” – notes Imre József Balázs in a 2001 review (Balázs 2001: 94). It is also worth mentioning that the aspects of “transborder issue” play an increasingly minor role in the reception of literary works, which mostly earns positive feedback from both writers and readers. Owing to the strong partnership between the two nation parts, in the 2020s it is less important whether one lives on one or the other side of the border.
In the first two decades of the 21st century, Transylvanian Hungarians have established their own social, cultural, and literary forums, educational networks, and civil organizations that have effectively promoted the process of parallel nation building, the development of a “transnational consciousness” (see: Bárdi 2013). There are new publishers, new literary journals and academic institutions that enable communication in the mother tongue and the representation of the specific problems of Transylvanian Hungarians. As a consequence of the technological innovations, Hungarian news sources, cultural and literary initiatives are reachable, and with the development of the Internet and the online media, information is accessible in the same way and at the same time to both the community living in the Carpathian Basin and Hungarian communities living in other parts of the world. Therefore, the aims that would have been important in the cultural and political/economic life of Transylvanian Hungarians after World War II seem to have increasingly been achieved since the 1989 regime change; especially since Romania’s accession to the European Union. Still, emigration and population decline, the state of fear and deprivation of rights, and the constant struggle to preserve one’s identity pave the way for scepticism, as well.

Now, if we try a little more carefully to delineate the differences that distinguish the aesthetic/poetic tendencies of the 90s Transylvanian Hungarian literature from previous (value) orientations, we can clearly state that, besides certain new tendencies, pre-regime change ideologies have always had followers, and not only among older generations. In a somewhat polarized manner, we might even say that the seemingly more traditional trends are interested in the continuation of the Transylvanianist discourse, including the aesthetic/poetic patterns emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, while other tendencies are concerned with the naturalization and further consideration of the discourse seeking to break with this tradition (see: Szilveszter 2020). The first, apparently more conventional attitude is generally associated with a need for tragic/nostalgic (self-)reflection, while a different kind of orientation, besides humour and language game, emphasizes the intention of redefining culture, society, and national image, as well as the idea of representing the 21st-century-mediated reality. As a matter of fact, in contemporary Transylvanian Hungarian literary works, these issues are at the same time linked to an external approach, focusing on Hungarian and Transylvanian characteristics from the outside, which, along current social, political, ideological tendencies, asks about the future of mother tongue, culture, and art in a somewhat pessimistic, often ironic manner. The playful/ironic portrayal of the narrow-minded provincialism is as much part of this (world) representation, which contemplates things in a “distorting mirror”, as the superficial adherence to local traditions and social patterns or the (self-)reflexive examination of the 21st-century identity crisis disguised as intellectual independence.
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